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Cleanup crew didn't report radioactive grit / S.F. group says it will sue contractors at Hunters Point

Jane Kay, Chronicle Environment Writer

June 7, 2001



2001-06-07 04:00:00 PDT San Francisco -- Three weeks ago, contractors hired by the U.S. Navy to clean up San Francisco's Hunters Point Naval Shipyard found radioactive sandblast grit in an excavation pit.

But the contractors did not immediately notify residents and the workers that the grit, called Black Beauty, contained radium 226 at 35 times the normal background radiation levels, say environmentalists, tenants and neighbors.

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Yesterday, ARC Ecology, a San Francisco group that monitors military activities, filed a lawsuit -- IT Corp., ITSI and Tetra Tech -- in the San Francisco Superior Court.

The group alleges that by not warning the neighbors and workers, the contractor requires businesses to tell people if they might be exposed to unsafe levels of substance that could cause other reproductive damage.

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Responding to the concerns, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency tested the excavation site yesterday, and confirmed that the radiation levels were higher than normal. However, the officials assured the public and workers yesterday that the levels were not high enough to pose a danger.

But environmentalists were skeptical, saying they have asked the Navy and the EPA to see the testing documents pertaining to the 80-acre "Parcel B" on the shipyard's northern edge, which is scheduled for transfer to the city in 2002.

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Cleanup of the Hunter's Point shipyard, which is under the national Superfund program for cleaning up the nation's most toxic sites, has been plagued with problems. Nine months ago, the Navy did not report a landfill fire at the site.

Saul Bloom, executive director of ARC Ecology, said he was disappointed that the Navy and its contractors "didn't inform their workers, the tenants on the shipyard or the surrounding community that they had uncovered a problem."

The elevated readings were found May 17, and the workers were told May 21, he said. On May 24, the Navy had a monthly meeting with the public but did not reveal the results, he said.

If it hadn't been for workers' expressing concern, the community wouldn't have known, he said. He praised Mayor Willie Brown's office for working with the Bayview-Hunters Point site.



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The Navy issued a statement yesterday saying a contractor "followed prudent health and safety procedures and stopped excavation activities in the area" after finding "minimal" radiation levels in the grit.

"Contractor activities will not resume until the Navy and regulatory agencies agree on the appropriate procedures to complete the cleanup activities for these areas," the Navy said. The area is fenced off to the public.

Representatives of the contractors did not reply to calls.


Don Meer, the EPA's chief of the federal facilities cleanup branch in the Superfund division in San Francisco, called the incident "a real mess." He said the Navy would have to dispose of the radioactive grit.

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"The radiation levels are definitely elevated. This is a rad-waste, and it does warrant further investigation," Meer said. "The workers were in no danger," Meer said.



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The tests found that the radium 226 came from naturally occurring zirconium in the grit, he said. The EPA did not find cesium, which might indicate the presence of other radioactive materials from past activities at Hunters Point. Ships coming home from nuclear weapons tests in the South Pacific in the 1950s were sandblasted there.

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But neighbors and workers held a news conference yesterday demanding that the Navy act more responsively.

The workers were not informed that there was a possibility of finding radiologic materials in their daily briefings, they said. Even after the contractors found the contamination, they were allowed to continue without protective gear or radiation monitors.

"As I looked over my field notes, I see that I've worked in areas where there are radioactive materials on the ground or underground -- like the landfill on the southwestern part of the base," said Mark Bradley, who has worked at the shipyard for the past nine months.

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Bradley, who worries about workers who might have brought toxic or radioactive materials home to their children, would like testing to make sure they have not been exposed.

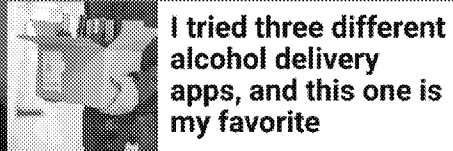
Over the last century, private industry and the armed services have used the 500-acre shipyard, leaving behind toxic metals, polychlorinated biphenyls, asbestos and other chemicals. After millions of dollars

the land will be turned over to San Francisco as part of a larger redevelopment project.

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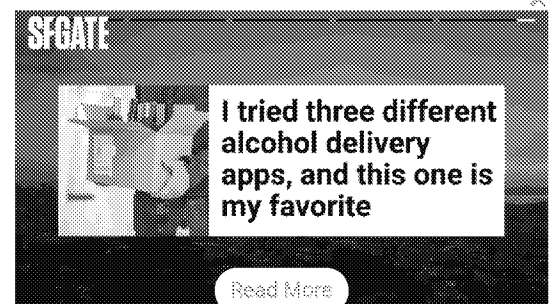


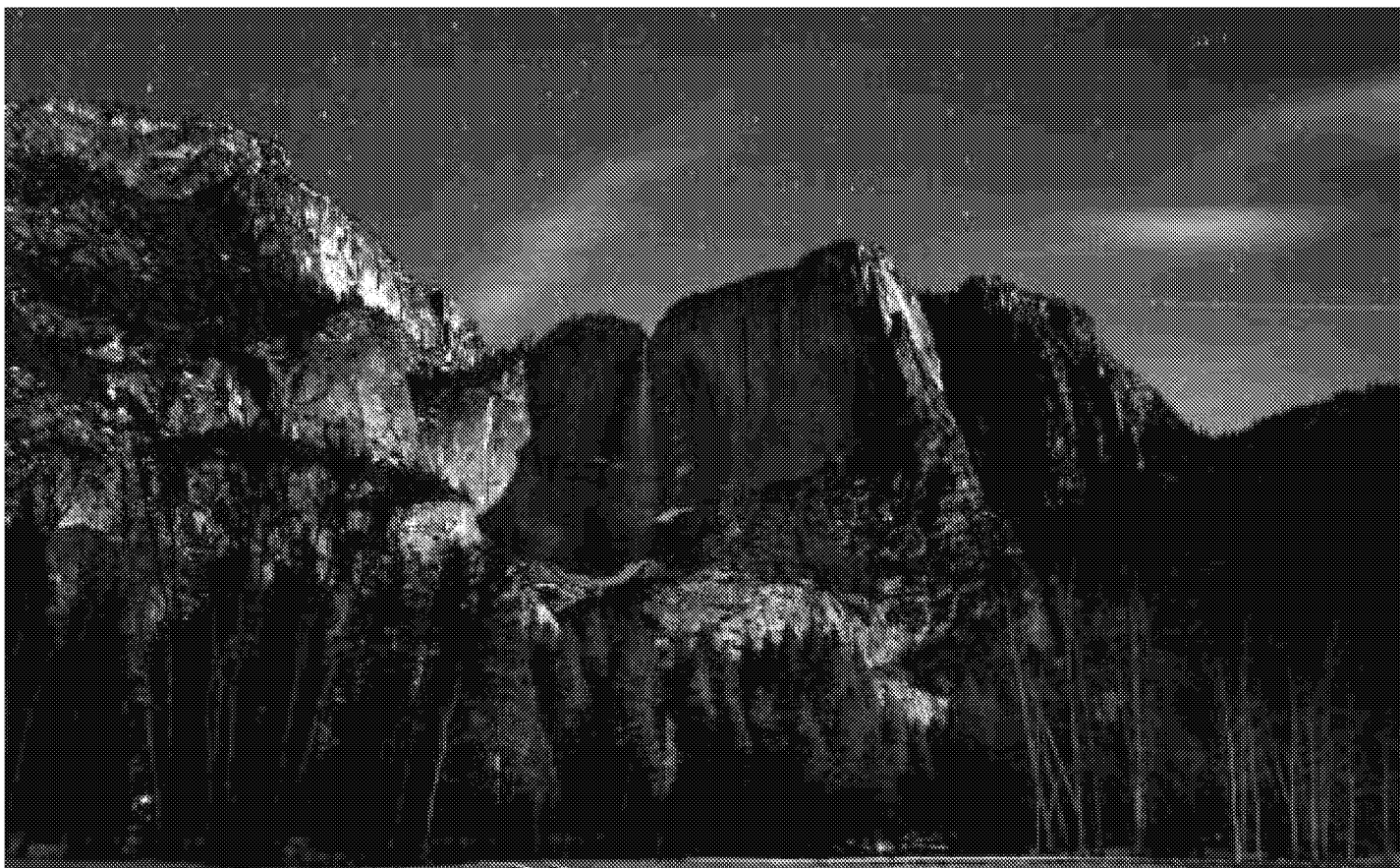
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Bay Area & State





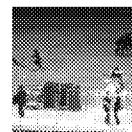
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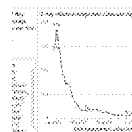


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